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# IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- No, You May Not Come Train My Staff

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# IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

## No, You May Not Come Train My Staff

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It's become a familiar ritual by now. Several times during any given year — in fact, it happened again while I was writing this piece — a sales rep will call me on the phone or send me an email with one of two apparently generous offers: he wants either a) to come to my institution and meet with all the librarians in order to demonstrate the features and functionality of a new product, or b) to come to my library and train my staff in the use of a database or ejournal package to which we already subscribe.

To both offers, I almost always say no.

Am I crazy? Why wouldn't I want to be informed about new and upcoming products that might be of use to my patrons? And don't we generally want vendors to offer us *more* training and product information, rather than less?

Let me deal with those three questions one at a time.

Am I crazy? I asked my wife to answer this one for me. She bit her lip and furrowed her brow silently for a moment, then asked me to define my terms. I withdrew the question.

Don't I *want* more advance product information? Product information, yes. If you're getting close to releasing a new product or service and you think it might be of interest to my institution, then please, by all means, tell me all about it. Ideally, I'd like you to do so by means of a concise email message with perhaps a one-page attachment (not a ten-page brochure) summarizing the product's purpose, characteristics and pricing schedule. If I receive a message like that from you, and if I agree that the product on offer is something my institution should at least consider, I'll forward it to the appropriate people in my library and add it as an agenda item for discussion at our next collection development meeting. If I think it's something that clearly does not fit well with our needs or budget, I'll respond promptly and politely say so. (If you bring up the same product in weekly emails over the course of the next month or two, however, my politeness will eventually start to deteriorate.)

If you must, you can call me on the phone instead of emailing the announcement to me. However, I probably won't be able to talk for very long, because if I'm near my phone it's usually because I'm working, which means that I'll probably be in the middle of something when you call. And when the conversation is over, you're still going to have to send me an email message with the product information attached — I'm not going to take notes from our conversation and then fashion them into a sales pitch to send to my colleagues on your behalf. You might as well save both of us some time and irritation by just sending me an email to begin with.

So, yes, I'm happy to receive information about new products. However, I'm much less willing to gather our librarians together for a meeting with a sales rep for the purpose of hearing about a new product. Again, why? Don't I want my colleagues to know what's coming from our vendors? The answer is yes, I do. But I'm only willing to pay a certain price for that information. If I gather 40 full-time library employees for a one-hour meeting, that's an investment equivalent to one person's whole workweek. It's as if I took one employee aside and said "I want you to do nothing during this entire week but learn about Vendor X's new product." I do want to learn about the product, and I want my staff to learn about it as well, but I'd much rather get that information in a less thorough but (to me) completely acceptable format — email — that will involve a relatively small investment of staff time. I understand why sales presentations are attractive to vendors' marketing departments: the rep has a captive audience, can control the presentation and can influence the content of the discussion. But none of these benefits is very compelling from the library side. Yes, there are times (such as when we must decide between two expensive and competing online products, or when we're establishing a new relationship or setting up a major new service with a vendor) when we do invite vendors to come and make presentations on site. But in most cases, such visits are a very inefficient way for my staff and me to gather product information.

How about when you're designing a new product and want our input? Shouldn't we *want* to help ensure that these products will meet our patrons' needs, rather than staying aloof from the design process and then complaining about the products' shortcomings after they're released? The answer to this question is another question: Yes, we're interested in helping, but why should our institution pay for the privilege? If you want the benefit of our expertise — in other words, if you want to use my library staff as an extension of your marketing department or your research and development group — then it should be you (not the taxpayers of Nevada) who pay for that time. At the institution where I work, my colleagues and I are available to provide consulting services at very reasonable fees.

Don't I *want* training in use of the vendor's products?

Short answer: no.

Medium-length answer: if your product is so poorly designed that it takes an hour to train

someone how to use it, then it's your product — not your customers — that needs fixing.

Long answer: my library serves a student population of about 14,000 and a faculty and staff of about 1,000. You can come in and train my staff and me, but there is absolutely no way for us to pass that training on to more than a tiny fraction of those on our campus who will be using your product. Yes, we'll be able to train a few of them, but if we're paying a lot of money for your product (which is obviously the case, since you're willing to send a trainer to our campus), then a few isn't enough. We want *all* our patrons to be able to use it with as little effort and confusion as possible. If you think

about it, it's crazy to release a product to the market that is intended for unmediated use by inexperienced researchers, but that requires training before it can be used effectively. Sales reps are always shocked when I say no to such offers. I'm always shocked that they think the offer makes any kind of sense.

Now, I'm not saying that on-site training is always a bad idea. One thing that we do always want in our online products is a high level of administrative flexibility, and that usually comes at the cost of behind-the-scenes complexity. A product may have an exquisitely clean and intuitive user interface, but a very complicated administrative module. Where such is the case, it can make very good sense to send us a rep who can train the staff members who will be using those functions. In such cases, the time invested by both parties in training is much more likely to return solid benefits to the product's users.

In all of the above, I hope I haven't come across as arrogant or ungrateful to those vendors and publishers who offer to send reps to my campus to inform us about new products or give us training. I realize that it costs vendors a lot of time and money to supply those services, and that they often do so in the belief that it's what their customers want and need. In fact, many have probably gotten requests for such visits from their library customers, and may now be understandably frustrated to have another librarian saying that those visits are a big waste of time. To those vendors and publishers, all I can say is that attitudes on this issue will, obviously, differ widely from librarian to librarian. But in this, as in all other issues related to library work, we need to make sure that we're looking rigorously at the costs and benefits of our standard practices. Some practices that have become standard or automatic are no longer the best options available. 🐾

